

MEMFix Goes South

Block party planned for history-rich Soulsville area

By Bill Dries

Of the neighborhoods in which the Mayor's Innovation Delivery Team has been working to build retail and commercial trade, none has the amount of history, turmoil, potential and perception problems found in the two blocks east and west of Mississippi Boulevard and Walker Avenue.

MEMFix is a one-day event that focuses attention not only on existing businesses; it also animates vacant storefronts and lots in the same area with "pop-up" businesses that move into the space for a day's time.

Throw in street entertainment, live music, a lot of bright colors and just about anything else to animate the area, and you have a block party with a purpose.

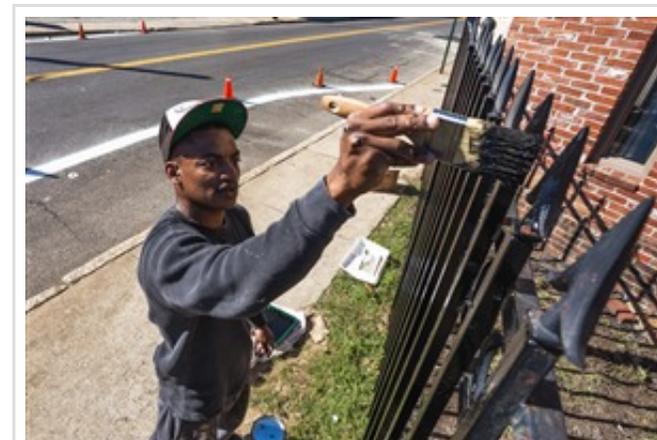
And it comes to Mississippi and Walker Saturday, Oct. 12, from noon to 6 p.m.

The purpose isn't to make a retail sales goal for the day, but to show merchants who don't currently operate in the area what the neighborhood could look like if more businesses returned. It is also to show that people will come to the area.

"There are a few thriving businesses up there. We've got a daycare that's been up there for 20-plus years along with the Four Way Grill," said [Jeffrey Higgs](#), president and CEO of the [LeMoyne-Owen College Community Development Corp.](#) "I think when they see some of just the minor things that we are going to do for one day, I think they are going to see that there is an opportunity for maybe a little more retail. Maybe we can support another restaurant other than the Four Way Grill."

The MEMFix event will include a pop-up restaurant and a clothing store near an intersection Higgs sees as a gateway into the Soulsville area, where the CDC he heads works closely with the Soulsville Foundation and its affiliates: the Stax Museum of American Soul Music, the Soulsville Charter School and the Stax Music Academy.

"What we want them to do is look at the area as a whole. ... We're hoping that people will explore a little bit and look at the area as a whole," Higgs said. "You've got some old retail that's still standing. You've got a pretty strong neighborhood when you think of 150-year-old LeMoyne-Owen College. You think of Stax Museum, which is back up, and the Soulsville Foundation. You think



Bacari Keaton paints the fence outside the Four Way Restaurant at Mississippi Boulevard and Walker Avenue. The area is the site of the next MEMFix event, on Saturday, Oct. 12, from noon to 6 p.m.

(Daily News/Andrew J. Breig)

of Elmwood Cemetery, and you think about the churches. I think we have some of those traditional kind of anchors in the neighborhood.”

Previous MEMfix events have included one in April at Walker Avenue and Highland Street by the University of Memphis, and one in November 2012 on the stretch of Cleveland Avenue that runs by the Sears Crosstown building.

Like those neighborhoods, the Mississippi and Walker area has its own institutions, ones that are more heavily weighted toward a deeper history.



Percy Seldon puts a fresh lane marker down at the intersection of Mississippi and Walker near Soulsville in preparation for MEMFix on Saturday, Oct. 12, from noon to 6 p.m.

(Daily News/Andrew J. Breig)

J.E. Walker, the founder of Universal Life Insurance, the largest black-owned insurance company in the South, lived a few blocks south of the intersection. Walker built the foundation for black-owned business and finance in Memphis during the era of racial segregation by law. Blues music composer W.C. Handy also lived in the area during the time he began writing down his arrangements of blues songs he heard in the Mississippi Delta.

The intersection has long been a business district, stretching back to at least the late 19th century.

The People’s Grocery Store was at one corner of the intersection, an early attempt at black-owned commerce. The black businessmen who opened the store were in direct competition with a white grocer on another corner.

The competition took on a life of its own in 1892, when the white grocer swore out an arrest warrant against the owners of People’s Grocery and then told his competitors that a mob would ransack the store.

The owners didn’t know about the warrant and camped out in their store, expecting a mob. They shot at and wounded a sheriff’s deputy and were arrested.

They were taken from their jail cells by a mob, and all three were shot to death in a rail yard.

The lynching ignited a crusade by Ida B. Wells. Wells, who knew one of the victims, wrote an initial account. A mob ransacked the newspaper’s office while Wells was out of town, and Wells never returned to Memphis.

“You have a neighborhood that’s really close to Downtown,” Higgs said, pointing out that the area is closer to FedExForum than Harbor Town on Mud Island. “And I’m just being real – I can take you a block or two out of Soulsville and we’ve got some crime issues. We’ve got some housing issues. In that way, while we feel very comfortable here in Soulsville and around the college and

the museum and Towne Center and College Park, not far from us we've got some challenges outside the neighborhood.”